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ABSTRACT

The 5-page information sheet presents a brief history and background information involving the social worker and the Indian client. Also provided are lists of differences in Indian and White cultural values and kinds of practices concerning interpersonal relationships common among the Indian people, and suggestions and techniques for use by social workers with Indian clients. (ERB)

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Spring 1980

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THE SOCIAL WORKER AND THE INDIAN CLIENT

Revised Spring 1980

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The social worker's role has been a thankless one. Throughout its history it has been the brunt of complaints from politicians, supervisors, clients, and the tax-paying public at large.

The reasons for this castigation are simple. Many people don't like the idea that everyone can't handle their own problems by themselves, and would rather brush off any responsibility for helping others. Often this attitude is developed by people who have themselves been too proud or fearful to seek help, or have sought it and been refused and have had to "make it on their own." Also, many people don't like the idea that "their tax money" is going to feed someone else when they can barely feed themselves. Lots of people don't like the idea of having to ask for help, or that the helper demands so many private and detailed bureaucratic answers to detailed questions. Or they don't like the involvement of a public agency in their private lives, or other people defining their needs.

The social worker is caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, there are legal and paper-work requirements that often take more of the social worker's time than the services to the clients. On the other hand, there are bureaucratic limitations to the help they can provide, and the clients are seldom satisfied with it. Supervisors are on their backs with too heavy a case load and too many meetings and reviews. It is the classic case of not being able to please everyone, and sometimes not ANYone!

Nevertheless, it is one of the most important roles in our society today. The social worker has direct contact with the sections of our population in the greatest need, and is able to see needs sometimes before society-at-large has even recognized them. The recommendations made by the social work professional influence public policy, sociodynamics in the community, and even history. It might even be said that whatever stability we have in our society is due to the presence of social service programs. If such programs did not exist, many of the poor and hungry would take to the streets, as they once did, which historically was a

major factor in the development of social service programs to aid the needy. Social services keep our country out of chaos.

With this background, let us look more closely at the social worker and the INDIAN client. Indian people are one of the smallest minorities in the country. The 1970 census numbered less than a million in all 50 states. As a minority, Indians have suffered from a long history of discrimination that has resulted in some staggering statistics: Indians have the highest rates of unemployment, poor housing, high-school drop outs, teenage pregnancies, suicides, and alcoholism, and the lowest rates of academic achievement, job opportunities, and upward mobility. These data are enough reason in themselves to explain why there are so few Indian social workers, or professionals in ANY field.

All this adds to the mistrust and suspicion Indians have traditionally held for social workers, especially those working for non-Indian service agencies. There is a long and terrible legacy that created this mistrust, and on many levels it is still justified. But this legacy must now be faced as social work is modified to serve American Indians more effectively.

Currently there is strong belief among many Indians that social workers have not adapted their technology to any appreciable degree so that it may better serve Indian people. In fact, social work education has not taken significant steps toward this objective in spite of some recent initial attempts. However, there HAVE been a number of significant attempts to reform social work EDUCATION so that it can better serve Indians and other minorities. In 1970, as a result of minority group protests and pressures, the Council on Social Work Education (the accrediting agency for all schools of social work in the U.S.A.) formally committed itself to pay special attention to the needs of minority groups and to work to eradicate racism in social work education. A year later the Delegate Assembly of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 1971) adopted a policy statement: "Civil Liberties, Justice, and the Right to Dissent." Thus, these two major social work professional organizations set the stage for the implementation of programmatic changes in social work organizations and schools of social work, and hence for changes in social workers' attitudes and behavior toward other races and minorities, including Indians.

Concurrent with the formal policy changes adopted by these two organizations, the Association of American Indian Social Workers was formed by a small core of Indian professionals concerned with the social work problems of Indians and the seeming inability of the social work establishment to offer meaningful services to Indian people and effective solutions to their problems. This Indian organization was able to form liaisons and provide consultative guidance to the non-Indian professional organizations regarding Indian issues, problems, and potential solutions. Subsequently, it had input into the provision of social welfare services to Indian people and suggested modifications in the educational programs of Indian and non-Indian social workers who might eventually serve Indians.

Indians were also named to the CSWE's Special Committee on Minority Groups, now the Commission on Minority Groups. Out of this commission came the American Indian Task Force all of whose members were Indian and which was charged with studying the social welfare problems and needs of Indians as well as making recommendations for changes in social work education.

In its 1973 report, the Task Force recommended that schools of social work give highest priority to the recruitment of Indian students and faculty, to the securing of funds for stipends and scholarships for Indians, and to the development of content relevant to Indians for inclusion in social work curricula. The main objectives of these recommendations were to improve social work education for both Indian and non-Indian social workers who might serve Indian people and to give social workers greater access to knowledge about Indians and a greater sensitivity to their cultural differences and socioeconomic conditions.

These efforts are just now beginning to bear fruit, mainly by increasing the numbers of Indian students attending schools of social work. There is still much progress to be made in the recruitment of Indian faculty and in curricular modifications, and the gains which have been made in these areas are themselves in jeopardy because of cutbacks in federal funding.

However, federal monies are finally being made available more broadly for some specialized programs and services for Indian families and children. The grant to establish the National Indian Child Abuse and Neglect Resource Center is an indication of the recognition that there are unique social problems that the Indian faces, and unique ways in which Indian problems must be addressed.

Certain organizations still need to be made of non-Indian social workers as they work with Indian clients, and certain delineations of traditional Indian cultural values need to be known. The following very brief outline lists some of these differences in Indian and white cultural values:

Some Tribal or Traditional Cultural Values	Urban-Industrial (non-Indian) Cultural Values
group or clan emphasis	individual emphasis
present-oriented	future-oriented
non-emphasis on time	emphasis on time
age is revered	youth is revered
cooperation and concern for groups	competition and self-acquisition
harmony with nature	conquest and control of nature
giving	saving
pragmatic	theoretical
mystical	skeptical
shame	guilt
permissive	coercive
extended family and clan	immediate nuclear family
spiritualistic	materialistic
non-confrontative	aggressive, often with violence
silent or soft-spoken	noisy or brash
respect for others' religion	contempt for others' religion
natural resources belong to all	natural resources are privately owned
beneficial and reasonable use of resources	avarice, greedy abuse and depletion of resources
egalitarian	totalitarian
face-to-face government	impersonal government
compact living, close contact	spacious living privacy
low self-esteem	egoistic self-importance

Historically, North American Indian tribes consisted of relatively small groups of people living and traveling in physical proximity. The extended family was the basic unit, with responsibility for the welfare of each member of the extended family or tribe being shared by all. The traditional extended family is discussed by a number of authors whose writings were reviewed for this research (Boggs, 1956; Thomas, 1962; Locklear, 1972; Lewis, 1970; Alexander and Anderson, 1957; Thompson and Joseph, 1947; Bennett, n.d.), and is discussed more fully in a separate paper.

In addition, there are certain practices of interpersonal relationships common among Indians that often cause social workers to interpret the Indian client as non-cooperative, stubborn, belligerent, and impossible. These traits include:

(1) The principle of self-reliance. Indians generally prefer to be self-reliant, are hesitant to ask for or receive help, and this is often interpreted by a social worker as belligerence and stubbornness. It also informs the tendency of the Indian not to seek help until the absolute last minute of an emergency.

(2) The principle of non-interference. Most Indians consider interference in other's lives as a sign of disrespect. They generally practice the "live and let live" philosophy, allowing others to make their own mistakes and decisions. They expect the same to be afforded them. Thus when a social worker intervenes in family life, it is interpreted by many Indians as an act of disrespect, a threat, and an insult.

(3) The principle of non-confrontation. Many Indians will prefer not to confront people when they disagree with them. Instead, they will avoid them. If a social worker tells an Indian parent that they MUST take their children to school, the parent may be very agreeable and pliant, but once the social worker is gone, simply refuse to comply. Often this is interpreted as belligerent, stubborn, non-cooperative, and immature, and it may frustrate a social worker very much. It is important to understand this dynamic in interpersonal relations.

(4) The principle of diversity. This is a principle that Indians understand, but it is important that non-Indian social workers understand it also, so that they will not generalize about Indians inappropriately, or lump them all into some large category or definition.

(5) The principle of respect for elders. This is self-explanatory. Indians traditionally revere elders in the society, and thus it would be difficult for a young social worker to be accepted if he or she should patronize an older Indian client.

(6) The principle of the extended family. There have been incidences of Indian children removed from their families by social workers as having been "abandoned" when the parents had only left them with aunts or grandparents for a long period of time to go to the city and look for a job. Social workers should be very circumspect about the definition of "abandonment" which they use in working with Indians.

Separate papers address the Extended Family in more depth, as well as the Home Visit, Communication Skills, Recognizing and Treating Child Abuse and Neglect, and Model Programs.

SOME SUGGESTIONS AND TECHNIQUES FOR USE BY ALL SOCIAL WORK PERSONNEL

The basic prerequisite for appropriate client/worker interaction is to have a concept of your role as social worker that requires you to be respectful, courteous, and sensitive at all times to all clients. That concept must define your role as a provider of services to those in need of them. Following are some strict do's and dont's:

DON'T	DO
Don't feel superior.	Do feel specially trained.
Don't feel contemptuous.	Do feel respectful.
Don't provide as little service as is possible.	Do provide as much service as is possible.
Don't make clients feel guilty for using taxpayers' money.	Do be grateful tax money is set aside for these services and for your salary!
Don't make moral judgments of clients.	Do make professional decisions.
Don't interfere in unrelated matters of the client's life and relations.	Do limit your inquiries and investigations to things directly related to the case.
Don't refuse information about other related services and procedures.	Do offer as much information as possible about other services and procedures.
Don't be authoritarian (don't quite rules unless asked.)	Do be expert (know the rules by heart yourself!)
Don't give the impression that your rules are more important than your client's needs.	Do know ways rules can be bent to serve the client's needs.
Don't be coercive.	Do be persuasive.
Don't be accusatory. Don't limit possible answers to your questions.	Do be questioning in a manner that allows any possible answer to a question you ask.
Don't be demeaning or insulting.	Be upgrading and complimentary without being superficial or patronizing.
Don't say "we can't do that . . ."	unless you add "but we can do . . . "
Don't be disinterested in other problems and concerns of the client.	Do be willing to listen to whatever problems the client wants to discuss.
Don't EVER say "I'm too busy..."	Do organize your caseload so you are not too busy to respond to special needs.
Don't EVER say "that's not my job..."	Do tell clients who or where they can go to for problems you cannot handle.
Don't visit your decisions on your clients like a sledgehammer.	Do include the client in decision-making about their own lives.
Don't refuse to consider the client's schedule and convenience in timing your visits or making appointments.	Do be firm about requirements but allow the client to have input on best times for visits, appointments, etc.
Don't react out of your anger to anything the clients says or does to you.	Do leave a situation if your emotions become too involved, and return later when you are calmer.
Dor't make rash assumptions, or any promises you cannot keep.	Do make careful, well-thought-out and documented decisions, and be careful in promising services or actions that involve others.